

# DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES ON GROUP WORK

## The perspective of W.R. Bion

Dr. W. R. Bion has presented notions that have been very influential in the group work practice of many people. He has focused attention on the fact that a group is an entity that is defined by its function. Thus group work means that effort is made to get on with the specific function of the group. Group work per se is not the focus on the needs of individuals in a group because a group is more than the sum of its individual parts.

At the same time Bion is clear that there are different forces operating in a group that militate against the achievement of the work of the group. The concepts which he presents with respect to these other forces make sense of a number of apparently diverse phenomena. They are, therefore, integrative concepts and when understood provide much assistance to a group leader in understanding and relating to the group.

The perspective on group work of Whittaker and Lieberman that is presented later on builds on the work of W.R. Bion.

**The source of the Notes.** The material in these notes is derived from the books *Experiences in Groups* by W.R Bion, *Bion and Group Psychotherapy* edited by Malcolm Pines and from a lecture delivered by Margaret Rioch "Wilfred Bion's Work on Groups". *Experiences in Groups* is a collection of Articles, one published in *Lancet*, 27 November 1943, four in the *Journal of Human Relations*, Vols I-IV, 1948-1951, and one in the *International Journal of Psycho-Analysis*, Vol. XXXIII, Pt. 2, 1952. I recommend a reading of at least some of this book in order to gain a greater sense of Bion's unique way of thinking.

## **HIS BACKGROUND**

Bion was an officer in the British Army in World War II. For some of the time he was engaged in the selection of men for leadership roles and subsequently was in charge of the Military Training and Rehabilitation Wing of Northfield, a large military psychiatric hospital. In this training wing with some 200 patients Wilfred Bion and Dr. John Rickman attempted to transform a conventional hospital into a therapeutic community which would bring knowledge of how neurotic disability was a group problem, of its consequences for themselves and their relations with others, and their ability to function in society. Bion was only allowed six weeks for this work, yet, in this time he brought a radical innovation.

Bion thought that the first thing to be done in the Training Wing was "to find out what was the ailment afflicting the community, as opposed to the individuals composing it, and next to give the community a common aim." (1946 'Leaderless Group Project', *Bulletin Menninger Clinic*, 10:77-81.) Elsewhere he writes: "Neurosis needs to be displayed as a danger to the group; and its display must somehow be made the common aim of the group." (*Experiences in Groups* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1961), pp. 13-14.) His idea was to have a situation in which the patients were able to move about freely so that their behaviour gave a fair indication of their will and aims.

A range of different voluntary activities were organised including carpentry, handicrafts, and Army correspondance courses. If a man did not like any of the groups he could form a fresh group. Or if a man did not feel able to attend a group he could go to the rest room. Every day there was one hour of psysical training and a half hour community meeting at 12.10 p.m. for

making announcements and conducting other business of the training wing.

The results that emerged from this plan were that many new activities started and that, although for the first few days there appeared to be very little happening, there was a great deal of discussion and thinking going on. The next thing that occurred was that after it had been pointed out that only one or two men were attending a particular activity the men started to become self-critical. The characteristics of a neurotic community became obvious to the men and they started to complain that the wars were dirty. An orderly group was formed to deal with this matter. Complaints were made about the rest room being filled with loafers. Bion pointed out that there were uncooperative individuals in other communities such as Soviet Russia. When a desire was expressed for the loafers to be punished Bion pointed out that punishment had been already used unsuccessfully by many groups in society and suggested that the nature of the problem had not been fully elucidated. This was an important feature of his approach. He was determined that a solution to a problem would not be attempted until its borders had been clearly defined. Bion reports that there was impatience with this and then "a real belief that the unit was meant to tackle its job with scientific seriousness."

Within one month the 12.10 meetings developed into "business- like, lively, and constructive meetings." The groups began to operate well. The meetings were increasingly focused on the ability of the men to make contact with reality and to regulate their relationships with others and with their tasks. The foundations for the development of group therapy had been laid.

After the war Bion went to the Tavistock Clinic and in 1948 was asked by the Professional Committee to take therapeutic groups using his own techniques. In these groups he made study of the members tensions a group task.

## **HIS VIEWS OF GROUPS AS A WHOLE**

- a) Groups are looked at in terms of the whole rather than in terms of individuals making up the group. In the same way clock has parts but it is only a clock when the parts are put together in a particular way.
- b) The group has a function or work to do, just as a clock tells time. The group is defined as a function or set of functions of an aggregate of individuals.
- c) The group has come together to demonstrate group behaviour.

## **THEORETICAL STRUCTURE**

In every group there are two groups. There is the "Work Group" with its function and mode of behaving and there is the "Basic Assumption Group" with its function and mode of behaving. Each group behaves as if there are two groups with two different functions.

### **a) The Work Group (W)**

The Work Group is that aspect of group functioning that has to do with the real task of the group. One group may have the task of planning a programme, another to review the activities of the year, and another to study the behaviour of the group or to explore behaviour that is socially unacceptable.

The work group functions in the same way as the ego of a rational and mature person. The work group is therefore conscious of time and the processes of learning and development. Thus there will be an acceptance and tolerance

of the fact that group members may take a good deal of time to solve a problem or develop a new way of functioning. This is in contrast to other times in the group where there is intolerance, frustration or rage.

The Work Group defines its task and then creates a structure that will be likely to assist the completion of that task. For example, one group may decide to appoint a treasurer to collect dues and assign other group members to carry out specific tasks for the good of the whole.

The individual is in this group by choice and his interest is identified with the interest of the group.

The Work Group is in touch with reality and constantly tests its conclusions in a scientific spirit. It seeks for knowledge, learns from experience, and constantly questions how it may best achieve its goal.

#### **b) Three Basic Assumption Groups (ba Groups)**

Basic assumptions are primitive states of mind which come into being automatically when individuals get together. The fantasies and emotional drives associated with the basic assumptions unconsciously dominate a group's functioning in such a way as to interfere with its explicit work task. Thus in a personal development group the group members will start to act *as if* they had met together for another purpose other than to develop their abilities. As just stated the basic assumptions are unconscious. Thus they are tacit, unspoken, out of awareness. They can only be elucidated by a process of deduction. Conclusions are drawn on the basis of the emotional state of the group.

**(i)Basic Assumption Dependency (baD).** This is in the ascendancy when the group acts as if it had met together for the purposes of attaining security and having its members protected by one individual. The leader is assumed and expected to be omnipotent and omniscient. He is expected to be powerful, wise, loving and giving. Thus group members wait patiently for a long time as if that all they have to do in order to receive the magic cure from the leader. If only the leader will, he will solve all difficulties. He is idealized and idolized. Group members do not give adequate information about themselves or their difficulties. It is assumed that the leader knows everything.

I can remember many occasions when a group member will present a situation in such an abbreviated form that is not possible to enter into it with them with understanding and I think that you will be able to do that too. A person will say something like this: ' I have a tremendous lack of confidence in my relationships. Could you tell me what I need to do? I'm really desperate.'

When a group is in this emotional state there is an insistence that explanations be kept very simple. There is the idea that no-one can do anything difficult or complex.

By contrast with the group leader, the group members are treated as if they are inadequate, immature and know nothing.

The group does not test the reality of its assumption and therefore does not learn. It continues to look for the solution from a leader and when the designated leader fails to measure up to the group's expectations it may turn to one of its own number for leadership, and then to another and then another. Thus, its person in the group may try to provide an answer and each one may fail. The fact is that when you are

group leader it is essential to recognise that no-one can possibly fulfil the role that is assigned to them by the group. Thus the leader is doomed to fail just as any other person in the group who is assigned the leadership role is doomed to fail. Thus it is obviously a very poor idea to try to fulfil the role of the omnipotent leader.

Disappointment and hostility are aroused in the group members as a result of the leader's failure. But they remain blind to the reality and keep trying to force the leader to take proper care of them. They may point out that one of their number is especially sick and needing the leader's care. A group member who is put forward in this way may go outside the established boundaries of acceptable group functioning and actively seek special assistance and then be given special attention. Such an unsuspecting and foolish individual will become the object of anger and be abandoned by the group. Thus we see that in the dependency group there is a concern with greed. Watchful eyes are out to make sure that no-one gets more than their fair share of attention. Resentment, anger, and jealousy are displayed. At the same time there is the fear of judgement by the leader. Thus there is the conflict between the desire to express feelings irresponsibly and the desire to be mature.

Where the dependency group is dominant over the Work Group the group takes on the characteristics of a religious cult and the words, or writings, of a leader become a kind of Bible, for example the words and the writings of Freud, Bion or Moreno.

**(ii) The basic assumption fight-flight group.** This group acts as if it has met together to preserve itself and that this can be done only by fighting someone or something or by

running away from someone or something. Action is essential for fight or flight.

When the group is in this state it is generally violently anti-knowledge and anti-intellectual. The individual is of secondary importance to preservation of the group. The leader is one who can mobilise for attack or lead it in flight. The leader spurs the group on to courage and self-sacrifice. Such leaders should have a paranoid element in their make-up if they wish to be successful, for this will make certain that if no enemy is obvious, the leader will surely find one.

We also note that in the fight-flight group there is no tolerance for sickness and therefore casualties are to be expected. This is in contrast to the functioning in the dependency group where people with difficulties are valued because the leader can be seduced to take care of them.

The leader is expected to feel hate toward the enemy and to be an indomitable hero who will preserve the group against an external enemy.

If the leader sticks to the work task which is therapy or self study he will be blocked by expressions of hatred against groups or psychiatry or all things psychological and introspective or by avoidance. Such avoidance may take the form of chit-chat, telling of stories, coming late, or being absent. Bion has the point of view that panic, flight and uncontrolled attack are really the same. Panic does not arise in any situation unless it is one that might as easily have given to rise to rage. When the rage or fear are offered no readily available outlet, frustration arises which in a basic assumption group can not be tolerated. Flight offers an immediately available opportunity for expression of the emotion in the fight-flight group and meets the demands that



all basic assumptions groups have for instantaneous satisfaction. Attack offers a similarly immediate outlet.

(iii) **The basic assumptions group:** Pairing. When the pairing basic assumption is in the ascendancy the group meets as if it has met for the purposes of reproduction, to bring forth the Messiah, the Saviour. Two people get together on behalf of the group to carry out the task of pairing and creation. The sex of two people is immaterial but the basic assumption is that it is for sexual purposes. The group listens eagerly and attentively and hopefulness pervades the group. The group is living in the hope of the creation of a new leader, a new thought, something that will bring new life or solve old problems. The Messiah must be unborn for if a person or an idea should be produced by such a group hope will again be weakened for there will be nothing to hope for. If the leader takes the Saviour position the leader is rejected.

This group manifests itself through such ideas as 'Marriage will end and neurotic disabilities', or 'group therapy will revolutionise society'.

In summary, the common characteristics of all basic assumption life are:

- (1) It is oriented toward fantasy not reality. Fantasy is acted out impulsively and uncritically.
- (2) Primary process thought is manifested, that is; thinking which is out of time and irrational.
- (3) Development or growth are met with a hostile response.